Oral History Interview with
James Griffin

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James Griffin Summary

James Griffin enrolled at the Cal Poly Voorhis unit in 1945 to study Ornamental Horticulture and went on to join the faculty as an instructor. The Voorhis unit was the southern satellite campus of Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and was located at the site of the former Voorhis School for Boys in San Dimas, California. The campus and buildings were donated to the state by its founder Charles Voorhis in 1938. The Voorhis unit would eventually move operations to nearby Pomona, separate from San Luis Obispo, and become Cal Poly Pomona. Griffin recounts his experience as both a student and faculty member as well as the landscaping of the Voorhis campus.

Subject Headings

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

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James Griffin

August 14, 1972

Interview Conducted by Kenneth Kitch
Transcribed by: Andy Kung

JG: This is Jim Griffin, G-R-I-F-F-I-N. I was asked by Mr. Kitch to [pause] consider some of my background as regarding the Voorhis unit of Cal Poly, how I happened to attend Cal Poly at Voorhis and subsequently teach there.

Going way back to World War Two, as background, I returned minus an education. I should say I entered the services minus a college education and having been in the nursery business prior to World War Two, upon reentering civilian life in late 1945, decided that there must be something better in life than the bare existence of a small retail nursery. However, my first job upon returning to civilian life was as a salesman in a retail nursery and quite by happy circumstance, one of the other salesmen, a much younger man than myself, mentioned that he was leaving in August to attend Cal Poly at San Dimas.

Never having heard of Cal Poly nor San Dimas, I inquired regarding the circumstances and then inquired regarding the possibility of a man of my age 36, attending such an institution under the G.I. Bill. As a result of all of this, I drove up to the Voorhis campus and discussed the situation with Mr. Harold Wilson, who was dean of the Voorhis branch which was reopening as I found out to having been closed during the war. As a [pause] consequence of this happy discussion with Harold Wilson, made the decision to come back to college and enter in, in the field of Ornamental Horticulture.

At the time, Voorhis was offering only two years and then it was a matter of going to San Luis Obispo following that. Harold Wilson set me on my way by his enthusiasm and helping me to finance going back to school; keeping my family in San Diego and acting as or being employed as cashier in the cafeteria and janitor in the old dormitory for my room, so that I got both board and room, and hence was able to survive for the school year.

My recollection of the college at the time, were kind of in bad shape. It had been practically deserted for three years. New staff as I recall, there were 13 I think on the total staff at the time including custodians and maintenance people. I took courses in that first year in 1946-1947 from such people as Mr. [Oliver A.] Jolly Batcheller who was still with the college, and Mr. Quinn Conard who was still with the college.

It was decided toward the end of the school year in discussing my situation with Harold Wilson and Jolly Batcheller, the fact that I had one year of college at an earlier date at San Diego State and this one year at Cal Poly, that it would be to my advantage to finish my education at San Luis Obispo. Hence at the end of the one school year, I did transfer then to San Luis Obispo. I should hasten to add that another instructor I had during that one year, was Dr. [John F.] Lamiman who has since retired from Cal Poly.

After attending San Luis Obispo for two years and receiving a bachelor's science degree in Ornamental Horticulture, and also obtaining my teaching credentials, it was my intention of teaching in the Los Angeles city school system. At the close of the school year of 1948-49, again through Mr. Harold Wilson, I obtained a job teaching on the Vet program in the Norwalk area, and while there and waiting for the September year to start, preparing to go into the high school teaching in Los Angeles, I was extremely fortunate to have an opening occur at Cal Poly San Dimas in Ornamental Horticulture Department, and doubly fortunate to be offered the position teaching what we call in those days Carpentry and Concrete; everything from a course in tractors to a course in plant materials.

It was my recollection that we had something like 25 or 35 students in the department that first year and three of us in the Ornamental Horticulture Department, Jolly Batcheller, and Howard Boltz (who has since passed away), and myself. So, our offerings were somewhat limited in that regard, but we tried, we went in all directions we could. Cal Poly stays in my memory, the Voorhis Campus stays in my memory because of the peacefulness and the sincerity, peacefulness of the property and the sincerity of the people who were involved. Both the students and the staff remained at the Voorhis Campus, teaching at the Voorhis Campus until the college transferred officially to the Kellogg Campus. I stayed with the college until I retired in 1970.

KK: This is Monday, August 14, 1972 and you have been listening to James Griffin who is Jim to all of us over the years, a former member of the faculty, of the Ornamental Horticulture Department at Cal Poly Kellogg-Voorhis, and now professor emeriti. Jim, where are you living now?

JG: I'm living in Dana Point; this is about 60 miles South on the Coast.

KK: Not only a historic, but a lovely spot.

JG: President Nixon and I are close enough associated that we can see each other's houses although we never see each other.

KK: [*Laughs*] That's true with a lot of Californian neighbors isn't it.

JG: Yes, that certainly is.

KK: Jim, it has been renewing for you first in history as a student and then as a teacher at Voorhis. I was particularly glad to run across him on campus this morning because I had just about given up the hope of getting him over here for an important interview, and he has been a key member in so much of the activity of the two campuses that we want to be sure and include him. I can remember that early in the development in the Educational Center he was in charge of grounds there and then for matters of merely economic and efficiency and so on, we shifted the grounds over to somebody who was on the campus there.

But Jim, I can recall, gave me some tremendously good advice and was very interested in the campus as the remarks indicate there. Now, Jim you lived on Voorhis Campus for a while and

were very closely associated with the planning over there. Could you tell me, how we happened to get that camellia garden over there?

JG: Yes, the camellia garden was a result of the San Dimas Camellia Society who were looking for a natural spot or a spot to naturalize camellia's and hence, they contacted Mr. Batcheller, who was head of the Ornamental Horticulture Department, and as a combined Camellia Society [and] student project, the camellias were placed on the college property for the observation of the society, but were maintained and became the property of course of Cal Poly of Voorhis.

KK: Did you use them for class purposes and so on? Or did you do hybridizing or anything like that?

JG: Oh yes, they only justified their existence there because of instruction it was hybridization done and budding and grafting done as well as the maintenance of these and also using them of course for identification purposes.

KK: I noticed this that as the years progressed that the blooms, blossoms on so many of the bushes there, the plants seem to be decreasing in size. Is there any reason for that?

JG: Well, this is only could be a guess in that the particular area is subject to orchid fungus and camellias are particularly susceptible to orchid fungus, hence may very well be the vigor was depleted as a result of the fungus. It also very conceivably could be due to a running out perhaps of the strains of the varieties.

KK: And what would eventually happen to them?

JG: Well, they would tend to revert probably to the unimproved strains of camellias.

KK: That's a lot like your roses isn't it?

JG: Yes, very similar thing to the rose.

KK: So, you made good teaching use out of those?

JG: We made excellent teaching use out of these.

KK: Some of the most beautiful camellias I have ever seen were in there.

JG: Yes, they were known I think throughout this general area, the camellia gardens at Cal Poly.

KK: Known by some people who came over and start digging up some of the plants. Do you remember that?

JG: Yes, yes, they weren't content to take the flowers. I believe Mr. Kitch caught one or two in the act of taking the total plant.

KK: That's right, one of them had his station wagon backed up there [*laughs*]. Well, that's always been a problem there hasn't it?

JG: Yes, it has, although some of the memories of the Voorhis campus such as watching a fox and a skunk sitting side by side at twilight on the campus is something I'll never forget.

KK: I should think not. What other wildlife did you see around there?

JG: Well of course at night the coyotes, and the foxes very often rendered considerable music and we had considerable trouble at times with the deer coming in on campus and eating some of the ornamental foliage.

KK: Where did we get the tremendous planting of hibiscus there? I've understood that that probably is one of the best collections of hibiscuses in Southern California. [pause]

JG: My only recollection on the hibiscus, we didn't have a large budget for plant materials at the time, but we had three people in the Ornamental Horticulture Department, the three previously named who weren't adverse at all to ask the nurserymen in the area for donations. As a result, we got truckloads of plant material every place from Balboa Park, in San Diego to parks and nurseries in Santa Barbara. This was the origin of the hibiscus.

KK: I remember one time you really saved me a lot of misery. A rather prominent grower and developer of orchids had offered us a choice collection of 100 orchids, and we wanted to put them in a glass house. One way or another, you advised and prevented us from doing that. Watching the tremendous trauma that is a part of growing orchids, I couldn't help but through the years, thank you for saving me all that trouble.

JG: Sometimes these kinds of problems aren't apparent on the surface.

KK: But then fellas with your background, know. I can see.

JG: We find our troubles in other areas.

KK: [*Laughs*] Okay, fine. Now, are there any particular students that you remember from your teaching days or from your student days there at Voorhis?

JG: Oh yes, it seems being retired now and being in the consulting business, I travel around quite a little and I have run into former students from Cal Poly it seems almost everywhere I go. For instance, my wife and I spent a weekend at Furnace Creek in Death Valley and lo and behold here was one of my former graduates, former students doing a landscape job for the park department at Furnace Creek. Just this morning, I was talking on the phone with Harold Greek, who was park superintendent in Pomona and one of the first of the students that we had at Cal Poly. I think the graduates of Cal Poly, and Ornamental Horticulture, and Park Administration as well as in the other majors have served Cal Poly well, they have certainly been a credit to us.

KK: By the way, Harold Greek is going to help us out with a tape sometime soon too.

JG: Fine, Harold Greek preceded me at Cal Poly, as a matter of fact I believe that Seldon Kempton and Harold Greek at one time were the only two people on campus.

KK: I think so, Howard Hawkins was there too, and I think that was during the war time.

JG: Yes, during the war.

KK: Somebody told me that weeds grew way up to the top of the windows and so on and forth. That we just didn't have the manpower to keep it under control.

JG: As I recall the story, a part of the reason for the grass growing so high was that the only lawnmower they had, caught fire and was destroyed, and there were no other mowers available.

KK: [*Laughs*] That's a piece of history I've never heard before so there you are. I've often wondered how that great big gorgeous pecan tree got started there next to the reservoir. Somebody again has told me that is the largest pecan tree in Southern California.

JG: Yes, I've heard the same. I assume, although I'm not sure, that pecan was planted by the Voorhis family in 1928, I believe. Approximately that time on the Voorhis family first built the unit as a boy's school. I think that was a part of the first landscaping; I don't think that was a native there.

KK: I've often wondered how in the world it kept having nuts, because I've never been able to spot another pecan tree or anywhere near around there.

JG: No, well, there are a few varieties of pecans that are self-pollinating.

KK: That probably is the case.

JG: Must be the case.

KK: Now, how much landscaping did the Voorhis people do when they operated the boy's school there. Was it pretty complete, did they put out some of these Spanish oaks? Or were the Spanish oaks there and they built around them?

JG: No, the Spanish oaks are California live oak really.

KK: Pardon me.

JG: It's a California live oak.

KK: Don't we call them Spanish oaks?

JG: Sometimes yes.

KK: Well pardon me, go ahead.

JG: That's right, they were native there. Native [inaudible], some of the most beautiful in Southern California. Incidentally, they were preserved, all of them that was possible to preserve. Unfortunately, many of them have died since because in the grading for the buildings they weren't as careful as they should've been about filling around them, as a consequence, some of them were buried five or six feet deeper than they should've been and then eventually smothered out, but their planned landscaping occurred on the plateau where the buildings are. I think they kept all the slopes in the native state.

KK: How much did you have to do with the citrus groves and so on?

JG: We were not involved with them; the Crops Department, or Citrus Department as it was called in those days, managed those trees entirely. Other than matter of identification and observation as to the way they grew we weren't involved with the citrus crops at all.

KK: Who did the landscaping of the little cemetery, the burying grounds behind the chapel? Do you remember?

JG: Yes, of course, the little cemetery, [pause] had, [pause] was probably unplanned design wise other than it be behind the chapel during the days of the Voorhis administration, the Voorhis family administration.

KK: Sort of a meeting house plot there.

JG: Yes. Under the auspices of Mr. Boltz's however, in the design classes. It was redesigned and then the students and their landscape classes redid the installation according to the plan done by the design students. So, the design and the installation were student projects.

KK: Do you remember approximately what year that was?

JG: My guess would be that it must have been about 1951, '52. I can recall very distinctly that one of the students, who now is an instructor at Cal Poly, Jim Degen, was involved as a student in that project. I think it was probably about 1959 or '60. Excuse me, 1949 or '50 not ten years ahead of us.

KK: [*Laughs*] That's one question I better ask Jim then isn't it, to follow up.

JG: Yes, if you're going to talk to Jim Degen, be sure also to ask Jim Degen regarding the re-landscape behind Aunell [Aunt Nell, named in honor of Mrs. Charles Voorhis] dorm. I think he'll have some interesting comments on that. I know that he participated in that.

KK: Alright.

JG: Re-landscape.

KK: Fine, and that has certainly been a very useful part of the campus there.

JG: Yes, I think so.

KK: Now let's see, were you here when they did the patio with the dining area and what was then the college store and so on?

JG: The landscaping of the patio by the cafeteria was done while I was attending San Luis Obispo. The landscaping of the patio by the administration building was designed again by Howard Boltz's design class and was put in by my landscape instruction boys. That would have been in 1950 or 1951.

KK: Fine, now I'm wondering if you could tell me anything about the redwood, the sempervirens is over there in what we call the outdoor chapel. Somebody has told me that's the farthest south redwood in California.

JG: I had not heard that, but it could very well be. I don't recall having seen one further south than that. It is an extraordinarily good specimen for this far south. That area also incidentally was redesigned by Mr. Boltz's class, the outdoor [inaudible].

KK: You know, you fellas really left your benchmarks there didn't you.

JG: Well for good or bad, it was pretty inevitable that we would when the campus was so small and the student body so few in numbers.

KK: Alright now, are there any questions that you think I should've asked you and I didn't? Having to do with people or events or?

JG: Yes, I was hoping you would ask me what I would do if I were to relive my life.

KK: [*Laughs*] That's a good one. Would you please answer?

JG: Thank you, thank you. If I had my life to live over again. I would be a college professor at Cal Poly.

KK: That's just.

JG: If I had my wish.

KK: That's just about as complete a tie up as you could make isn't it?

JG: I think so.

KK: And let me say this that I have never heard anybody who wouldn't be very eager to have you back here in full time teaching.

JG: Well that is a pleasant thought.

KK: It is indeed.

JG: A gratifying thought.

KK: The rest of us who come along during the years can run the same type of response. Why that's all anybody can ask, isn't it?

JG: I must say that I appreciate the chance Ken, of expressing myself as regarding Cal Poly and Cal Poly people. I want to thank you.

KK: Well thank you sir, and as I told you before when we're through using this in the writing of the history. This goes into the College archives, as a part of the College's audio history, an oral history. So, it'll be there if you want to hear it again.

JG: Wonderful, that will be fine. I'd like to hear what some of the other people have had to say.

KK: Thank you.

End of interview

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